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ABSTRACT

Preschool children's story preferences were studied to determine if differences existed in preschoolers' preferences for reality, fantasy, people, and animals. Sex of character versus sex of subject was also investigated. Subjects were 84 children from preschools in Lincoln, Nebraska (39 boys and 45 girls). Through use of a nonverbal testing instrument, preschoolers were asked to select one picture from a set of four that represented a story they would enjoy hearing. Results showed a significant preference for animals over people, but no preferences in terms of reality and fantasy. No significant differences for age or sex were found, with the exception that preschool boys preferred fantasy pictures of fathers and reality pictures of mothers. (Author)

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The Story Preferences of Preschool Children

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Abstract

Preschool children's story preferences were studied to determine if differences existed in preschooler's preferences for reality, fantasy, people, and animals. Sex of character versus sex of subject was also investigated. Subjects were 84 children from preschools in Lincoln, Nebraska (39 boys and 45 girls). Through use of a nonverbal testing instrument, preschoolers were asked to select one picture from a set of four that represented a story they would enjoy hearing. The results showed a significant preference for animals over people but no preferences in terms of reality and fantasy. No significant differences for age or sex were found, with the exception that preschool boys preferred fantasy pictures of fathers and reality pictures of mothers.

Children's interest in literature is important because literature is a valuable resource for helping children learn about the world and their place in it. As Ruth Strickland (1961, p. 71) summed it up, "Children love books because by nature they desire to know and experience. The stories of the world in which they live help to form their philosophy of life and to enter into their common humanity."

A great deal of research has been done in the area of children's reading interests, particularly in the intermediate and upper grades. However, very few studies have focused on the preferences of preschool children (Zimet, 1966), and those that have been done may be methodologically flawed in that they rely exclusively on verbal reports from the children. While preschoolers are quite capable of expressing their preferences, they lack the ability to express their reasoning and cannot deal with the abstractness requisite to the forming of general categories the way in which adults can (Piaget, 1951). Thus, there is a lack of accurate information in this area, and the need exists to determine a method of evaluation that overcomes these problems.

It is noted that most educators and authors of children's literature textbooks claim that they have clear ideas concerning what young children enjoy in books. A quick perusal of the assumptions of such authors as Huck and Kuhn (1968), Coody (1973), Jacobs (1975), and Tucker (1981) concerning preschooler's interests reveals that their criteria for selecting books appropriate for and

popular with preschoolers have much in common. There appears to be a general consensus that young children enjoy simple, illustrated stories of people, places, and things. However, it is very important to note that the practices of early childhood educators in choosing literature for their charges are based upon theories such as these (and upon personal experiences) which have never been tested, and that no empirical base supports these assumptions. While it is possible to feel that one knows what preschoolers enjoy through personal observation, exactly what it is that makes a preschooler select one book over another is never clear simply from the basis of experience. Is a given book chosen because of the bright pictures, the lyrical storyline, or the fact that this particular book happened to be within the child's reach?

Studies with primary grade children, such as Oliver's (1977), and Ford and Koplyay's (1968), have found striking discrepancies between what young school children wanted and what they were being given for reading material in terms of character type and setting. Without comparable research on the preferences of preschool children (who are even less likely than these older children to take an active role in the selection of the reading materials to which they are exposed), the possibility that the same situation exists with younger children cannot conclusively be ruled out. It is possible that this circumstance may be even more unfortunate for the preschool child than it is for the school-aged child. Older children's and adult's interests might be theorized to be more

likely to be based on affect associated with past experience. The preschool child, on the other hand, has significantly fewer such experiences to base preferences on; instead, his interests are likely to reflect his needs for greater information concerning the world around him. (This is, perhaps, one of the reasons why young children's preferences seem to shift so much more rapidly than do adults, who are much more familiar with the world around them.) Since he has less control over the input coming in to him than does the older child, the preschooler is more dependent on adults to meet those needs than is the older child. At the same time, he is less able to express those needs. Thus, the ignorance of preschool teachers concerning the interests of their charges may be especially unfortunate.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine if preschool children prefer reality or fantasy, people or animals in their stories, and to determine if preferences differ with the age or sex of the child. These broad categories were chosen as the focus of this study for several reasons. First, they may be considered to encompass much of the literature young children are exposed to--real stories, pretend stories, animal stories, and stories about people (Oliver, 1977) and thus have validity in that these are the categories of literature that young children actually experience. Second, because no research has been done in this area, it was felt that general categories should be individually isolated and explored, thus providing a basis upon which subsequent, more specific areas could be researched. Finally, and perhaps most

importantly, these categories provide an answer to the most basic questions faced by those who develop materials designed for use with young children (such as researchers and teachers), who are often faced with very simple but important decisions at the earliest stages--e.g., will the character be real or pretend, and which would be more likely to hold the interest of preschoolers? Would the children relate to the story better if the character were an animal or a person? Will girls be "turned off" if the character is male, or vice versa? It is the purpose of this study to provide answers to these basic but important questions.

Literature Relevant To
Reality, Fantasy, People, and Animals

Reality and Fantasy:

It is a commonly held notion that young children prefer fantasy to reality in their stories (Oliver, 1977); this idea has frequently guided the development of materials designed for young children. Although the appropriateness of the use of fantasy with young children has been questioned (Taylor, 1975), at least one study suggests that young children love fantasy, since one of the favorite categories of stories chosen by the preschoolers in Mason and Blanton's (1971) study was that of fairy tales. On the other hand, some research suggests that young children like fantasy less than do older children. Kirsh (1975) found that first graders' favorite choice was "realistic stories about children", followed by "imaginative fiction and fairy tales". The number of children

expressing interest in the first category declined dramatically by second grade, indicating less interest in fantasy by younger children than by older. Oliver (1977) reported a similar trend, with third graders expressing greater preference for fantasy stories than first graders. Thus, it appears that while adults assume that preschoolers like fantasy stories best, they may in fact prefer more realistic portrayals of subject matter.

Animals and People:

Animals exhibit a general popularity with children that can be supported through the literature. Schofer (1981) found animals to be a solid second preference across all ages with his sample of British and American schoolchildren, and Mason and Blanton (1971) also found animals to be a favorite of preschoolers. Oliver (1977), using story settings comparing animal characters to human characters in an experimental design, found that first grade children had a definite preference for stories about animal characters and liked peer-relationship stories the least. Interestingly, O'Donnell (1980) found that older children prefer more realistic portrayals of animals while younger children liked "talking animal stories" better. This is in contrast to the finding discussed earlier which suggests that older children liked fantasy better than did younger, and supports the need for research detailing the nature of preschooler's preferences for the reality-fantasy dimension in conjunction with the people-animal character type.

Hypotheses

On the basis of the findings in the literature, it was hypothesized that preschoolers would prefer reality stories to fantasy stories and stories about animals to stories about people. Because gender-related differences have been noted with older children (Carter, 1978), the question of how preschool boys' preferences differ from those of preschool girls was addressed. A related question, whether or not preschool children prefer characters of their own sex to those of the opposite sex, was also researched.

Research with older children has also been characterized by significant differences between primary, intermediate, and upper grades in terms of reading interests (Carter, 1978). It was hypothesized that significant differences would exist at the preschool level, perhaps even between 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds because such rapid changes take place at this level. For example, a 3-year-old has just emerged from the Piagetian sensorimotor stage while a 5-year-old might be considered to be well into pre-operational thought. Since fantasy is considered to be one of the hallmarks of pre-operational thought (Piaget, 1951), the possibility of significant differences between children at different age levels was considered.

The final objective of this study was to answer the question of whether or not preschoolers view differently scenes depicting mothering as distinct from the same scenes depicting fathering. Parents are generally the most important people in the lives of

preschoolers and are frequently portrayed in stories geared to young children, especially realistic stories. However, no data is available which details children's preferences for type of portrayal of any specific category of character--even parents. Since parents are the among the most important actors to be portrayed in children's stories, it was felt that the inclusion of test items designed to explore the preferences of preschoolers in this area could provide important clues as to possible interactions between type of character, reality-fantasy, and people-animal preferences.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study were preschoolers enrolled at Ruth Staples Laboratory at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and at a local private preschool, also in Lincoln. The total group consisted of 84 children, of which 39 were male and 45 were female. Thirty-one 3-year-olds, twenty-eight 4-year-olds, and twenty-five 5-year-olds were tested.

Instrument

Preschoolers require a method of preference assessment which is interesting, concrete, and capable of testing the desired variables without requiring verbal rationale or extensive memory skills. Since they are more likely to centrate on one aspect of a situation to exclusion of others (Piaget, 1951), it was felt that simply asking the children could perhaps lead to skewed or "faddish" responses that were likely to change from day to day, and

thus the findings of such a study would be obsolete before completed. Thus, a nonverbal testing technique utilized by Ford and Koplyay (1968) with older children was adapted for use in this study. This method entails having the children select one picture from a group of pictures, representing types of stories they would like to hear. The pictures were designed to represent the sought-after variables without including extraneous factors.

The final instrument consisted of fifteen sets of black and white line drawings, prepared by the researcher. Each set of pictures consisted of four drawings--a real person, a real animal, a fantasy person, and a fantasy animal. Within each set, the characters were performing the same action. Within-set drawings were made as consistent as possible in terms of complexity, background, and general attractiveness. Simple line drawings were used in order to make the pictures clear and meaningful. No color was used since color could be a possible confounding factor in influencing children's choices.

Following completion of the reliability and validity portions of the study, the final instrument was balanced for sex of character. The sets were also randomly ordered and placement of kind of picture within the set was rotated.

Validity of the instrument was assessed through use of a three-step process. First, the pictures were inspected for clarity, representativeness, internal consistency, and overall quality by a panel of child development experts. Next, these

pictures were submitted to staff members at Ruth Staples Laboratory at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, who were asked to judge individual pictures by adult standards as to the representativeness of each picture in terms of its category. Finally, a group of fifteen preschoolers were individually shown randomly mixed sets of pictures and asked to point out "those that could really happen." They were then shown random sets again and asked to point to pictures with people in them. If more than four errors were made on any set, the set was discarded. Thus, the initial series of more than one-hundred pictures was pared down to sixty pictures, each of which was determined to be a valid representative of its category.

Test-retest reliability was determined by use of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation. With $N=15$, the following correlations were obtained: reality people, $r=.90$; reality animal, $r=.81$; fantasy people, $r=.84$; and fantasy animal, $r=.96$. An overall correlation of .91, with $df=13$, was found to be significant at the $p<.01$ level.

Procedures

The research was conducted near the classroom at a low table in a quiet area. The child was brought to the testing area and given a little time to talk and "warm up" before testing began. Then the child was told, "These pictures are about stories I could tell you. I want you to show me which picture you would like to hear a story about." The child was then shown the first set of pictures. In order to minimize confusion, the action in each set

of pictures was described. For example, the description of the first set was, "Here are some pictures of people and animals walking. Which one would you like to hear a story about? This one, this one, this one, or this one?" Each picture was pointed out in order to make certain that the child saw each one before making a choice. The same description was given to each child. The child would then point to the picture he or she preferred, and those selections were recorded on a separate sheet of paper. Total testing time was about 10 to 15 minutes for each child, and it was generally possible to test all the children in a classroom during a two-hour session.

Results

A 4 (preference) by 2 (sex) by 3 (age) within-subjects analysis of variance was performed on the data. A significant difference was found for the people-animal dimension [$F(1, 83)=12.21$; $p<.0005$] but not for the reality-fantasy dimension [$F(1, 83)=1.47$; $p<0.23$]. The mean for animals (4.20) was determined by use of a Bonferroni follow-up test to be significantly higher ($p<.05$) than the mean for people (3.29). No significant interaction effect was found between the two subscales. Thus, while the children tested showed no distinct preference for reality or fantasy stories, they did prefer animals over people in their stories.

Mixed-model ANOVA results showed no significance for subscale by age [$F(6, 83)=2.20$; $p<.089$], subscale by sex [$F(3, 83)=.97$;

$p<.444$] or subscale by age by sex [$F(6, 83)=.56$; $p<.761$]. Boys tended to display greater variability than did girls across subscale; boys had a mean variance of 6.33 for all subscales while girls had a mean variance of 4.82 across age and subscale.

Use of the Chi-Square test of independence showed no relation between sex of character and the sex of the child ($\chi^2(1, N = 84) = .968$, $p<.325$]). The number of female characters chosen (116 by boys and 106 by girls) was very similar to the number of male characters chosen (107 by boys, 106 by girls) for both sexes.

Finally, a contingency table analysis of subscale preferences for scenes of fathers versus scenes of mothers yielded $\chi^2(3, N = 84) = 7.214$, $p<.065$. When the data were split by gender of the child, it was found that $\chi^2(6, n = 45) = 2.96$, $p<.398$ for girls was nonsignificant while boys demonstrated significant differences in preferences, $\chi^2(6, n = 39) = 8.66$, $p<.0341$. Specifically, boys prefer fantasy pictures of fathers and reality pictures of mothers. Thus, there appears to be an interaction between the reality-fantasy dimension and parent gender for boys but not for girls.

Discussion

Adults often assume that children prefer fantasy stories to reality stories; this assumption has had a powerful impact on materials designed and selected for young children. For example, Saturday morning television is heavily oriented toward fantasy: even the more realistic shows often incorporate elements of fantasy, supposedly to make them more interesting to children. However, the results of this study show that preschoolers

demonstrated no preference for fantasy over reality. This suggests that more attention should be paid to providing realistic stories stories for preschoolers, since this area has often been neglected in the past. Realistic stories for preschoolers have great value in that they expand the child's knowledge of the world as it in fact exists--and furthermore, children enjoy them!

The children in this study demonstrated a significant preference for stories about animals, a finding consistent with the research of Oliver (1977) and Mason and Blanton (1971). Although preschoolers do significantly prefer animals to people in their stories, caution should be exercised concerning this finding. Certainly, it should not be taken as a wholesale endorsement of all animal stories, nor is it a reason to drop people out of stories designed for preschoolers. Preferences for people stories, whether reality or fantasy, were much more stable across age, while animal scores tended to fluctuate to a greater degree. Also, the patterns of boys and girls concerning their preferences for people stories were much more similar than their animal preferences, indicating that this may be a more common point for both sexes from which literary experiences may be planned. However, when a teacher wants to stimulate interest in a subject which may be less than interesting but nevertheless important to a preschooler (such as safety) use of an animal character as part of a planned literary experience can be a valuable tool for creating interest quickly and easily.

A trend for younger children to prefer "talking animal stories" while older children prefer more realistic portrayals was described by O'Donnell (1980). This study provides further evidence in support of O'Donnell's idea in that reality animals were more popular with 5-year-olds (mean= 4.68) than they were with 3-year-olds (mean=3.71). Thus, while preschoolers enjoy stories about animals, as they grow older they have a greater desire for those stories to be real. Perhaps as the child's world expands past her immediate environment to include a wider variety of animals, her greater desire for more information is reflected by an increasing preference for stories of real animals. People, who have been a familiar feature throughout a preschooler's three to five years of life, are more capable of being successfully integrated into either a reality or fantasy setting for preschoolers, and thus no difference in preference is evident.

No significant differences were found to exist between 3-, 4-, or 5-year-olds' reading preferences. It was theorized that a difference might exist because these young children are in a period of such rapid physical, mental, and emotional growth.
Since differences in preferences have been found with increasing grade level during the primary grades, it may be suggested that learning to read and the wider environment of school may play a greater role in influencing preferences than chronological maturation.

No significant differences were found for sex of child. Also, an analysis of the child's sex as compared with the number of male

or female characters selected revealed no significant differences. This is in contrast to a widespread belief that girls are interested in stories about boys but boys are not interested in stories about girls (Goodhue, 1982). Neither sex appeared to have an overwhelming desire to hear stories specifically about male or female characters; the sex of the character was obviously not an important variable.

One possible explanation exists for this finding. A common criticism of sex-biased reading materials is that, generally speaking, boys are portrayed as doing active, exciting things while girls are portrayed as doing more passive, bland things. Because this instrument utilized action verbs as a basis, all of the characters, male and female, were randomly assigned to be depicted as involved in some particular action. In most stories action and character both work together to create a plot, but in this case character could only be inferred in a broad sense because of the way in which the instrument was designed. Therefore, action became the focus, not the character or the character's sex, and no significant preferences for sex of character were found. The implication may be drawn that, all other things being equal, the sex of the character involved is irrelevant to preschoolers, whether the preschooler is a boy or a girl.

Finally, it was determined that there exists an interaction between reality-fantasy preference and depiction of parenting roles for boys but not for girls. This is in contrast to the overall

findings of the study, showing no difference in reality-fantasy preferences but a significant preference for animals over people, and of no difference for gender of character vs. gender of child. Perhaps this particular finding is due to the fact that children see their mothers most often as caregivers but seem to expect that interaction with their fathers will come in the form of play (Lamb, 1981). Fantasy and play are often closely linked for preschoolers. Boys, identifying more closely with their fathers and also more strictly socialized into their sex roles (Langlois & Downs, 1980), may be reflecting this pattern in their story preferences while girls do not. It is possible that as portrayals of nurturing daddies increase in stories designed for young children in the future, boys may show greater preference for more realistic depiction of fathers in caretaking roles. In any case, it is clear that preference for certain types of portrayals of some types of characters may indeed exist for some groups of preschoolers. Future studies which examine the relationship between child gender and preference for gender of story character should be careful not to overlook the important interaction effect of type of character, which this study demonstrates is likely to confound results.

Implications

It may be argued that the determination of the reading preferences of preschoolers is unimportant since it is more desirable to expand their horizons than to pander to their tastes. However, the purpose of doing preference research is not to suggest limiting the material given to preschoolers, but rather to

discourage those who work with children from imposing an adult's view of the child's tastes upon the child. Thus, this study was valuable in providing a starting point for much-needed research into the preferences of preschool children. Perhaps most importantly, it was found that young children are not only able but are also very willing to express their preferences when asked to respond in a manner they are capable of handling. The enthusiasm of the subjects of this study quite clearly demonstrates that preschoolers are ready for adults to listen to them on a variety of topics--if only adults won't decide the answers before they decide the questions.

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Author's Notes

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